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HEADLINE: Bridge owner blasts studies: Why trust government to move traffic, Maroun says

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BODY:

Matty Moroun says he will sell the Ambassador Bridge if the price is right and has no interest in taking full control of the Windsor-Detroit tunnel.

Those were among the revelations the secretive billionaire Ambassador Bridge owner shared during an exclusive four-hour interview with The Windsor Star this week.

Asked if aggravation or frustration in the border traffic battle became too great, would he sell if the offer was right, Moroun quipped: "I think the second part is right.

"If the offer is right we would consider it. We would be foolish if we didn't. It's a business deal.

"What aggravation? You've never seen aggravation until you are in the trucking business.

"Never seen aggravation until you deal with these auto companies. I don't even know how they think sometimes."

With parts shipping and the Big Three automakers in a downward spiral, the 78-year-old Moroun appears poised to come out from behind closed doors in an effort to regain control of a border traffic flow issue he has for decades ruled with authority -- some critics say with a fist.

"The bridge folks sincerely want to be builders," Moroun said. "We don't want to destroy anything. We want to make things better, not worse."

Moroun, son Matthew, and other bridge company executives said they were frustrated over what they described as the recent meddling of government bureaucrats and politicians into a business arena where the bridge company has unparalleled expertise.

WASTE OF MONEY

The binational Detroit River International Crossing (DRIC) -- assigned to select the next crossing location -- was blasted by both Morouns as a waste of money.

Bridge owner blasts studies: Why trust government to move traffic, Marou

When it comes to public ownership of local border crossings being demanded by residents and politicians, the bridge owner wonders if you trust government with moving traffic better than him.

Moroun doesn't. That's why in 1979 he bought the bridge in the first place, he says. Not so much for the financial bonanza it has proven to be, but to guarantee his trucks could traverse the border in a timely fashion. He wanted the ability to build infrastructure when needed, not relying on the glacial pace of governments.

"I would say the Ambassador Bridge over the last 35 years has done more to help the border than anybody," said Moroun, hinting much of the Windsor-Detroit economy rests on his shoulders.

"We added more booths, facilitated movement of vehicles. We took care of expansion to our gain -- and to our detriment. We have helped the border grow, we helped Windsor grow. We helped the county and province grow.

"So what's bad about an ownership that is private, that takes things to heart and has their hands in it for immediate action to everyone's benefit?"

Bridge company executives say they believe that even after DRIC decides on plaza and crossing locations, the Canadian and U.S. governments will not spend the minimum \$1 billion required from each side to fix what is essentially a Windsor feeder-road problem.

"All of us only have so much in resources, even the federal government," Moroun said. "They need to spend those where they can do the most good for the most people. That should be everybody's motto."

He said focus should instead be on the bridge's controversial four-kilometre ring road through the west end which the bridge company says was developed from the city's own WALTTS transportation study in the late 1990s.

The winding route along Ojibway Parkway and next to a rail corridor near College Avenue will provide a short-term fix for international traffic -- and in the long term could be used locally as an express road around the Huron Church Road corridor, Moroun said.

The proposal has come under fire from Sandwich residents, local politicians and provincial transportation authorities who say it would undermine the west-end community and does not address security concerns.

But Moroun countered the ring road will give Windsor an ability to "handle the traffic for some time" until a new crossing is required.

"Is it going to be good for a long, long time? I doubt it," he said. "Sometime in three, five or seven years, we ought to be sticking a shovel in the ground (for a twinned bridge). We will know things better at that time."

The impact of a planned plaza expansion on the U.S. side of the Bluewater Bridge in Port Huron must first be studied before determining what's needed for the border in Windsor.

"If they do that expansion they will take 25 per cent or more of the traffic away (from the Ambassador Bridge)," Moroun predicts. "In five years we should know whether it gets done.

"We also need to look and see what happens to industry. Have we hit rock bottom? Is that coming in two or three years, then turning up again? I don't know."

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His company owns large amounts of riverfront property in every potential bridge corridor stretching from Lauzon Parkway to south of Amherstburg, Moroun said.

"The best use of our money or anyone's money is to twin the bridge," he insisted. "To take advantage of the road structure in the U.S. and what little road structure there is in Windsor.

"If you spread a penny here and there, you won't have enough for a loaf of bread. Put them all in one place and you get a loaf of bread."

A bridge company offer to gain control of the lease for the Detroit side of the tunnel has been tabled, until a parallel proposal comes from the city of Windsor, which owns the Canadian side, Moroun said.

"They will be compared for value and cost," he said. "We may lose, we may not.

"We don't plan on owning it, setting tolls, or having last word on anything. We only want the rights to suggest, then they have to approve it like any board of directors.

"I don't think anybody wants to allow us to dictate to the tunnel. We don't plan on doing that."

Transport Canada said it has never received an offer from Moroun to sell the bridge nor has it made an offer to purchase, according to spokesman Mark Butler. Some estimates have put the bridge's value at around \$500 million Cdn.

"I can't say today if we'd be interested," he said. "There is a (new federal) government in place. A decision like that needs cabinet approval.

CHANGING TOLLS

"With the new crossing we are working towards, we definitely want to have appropriate public oversight. It's important so changing tolls or other things that affect movement of traffic can't happen without government approval."

Senior authorities with Transport Canada are also keeping a close eye on Moroun's bid for the Detroit side of the tunnel, Butler said.

"If the U.S. side of the tunnel is held by the Ambassador Bridge it would give them a monopoly," he said. "We would have concerns since there is a definite need for redundancy."

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GRAPHIC:

Colour Photo: Windsor Star, file; KEY LINK: Bridge owner Matty Maroun doesn't want to have to rely on the government to build border infrastructure.

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